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Housing, entryways and social architecture in poor borderlands of Mexicali

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Abstract

This article presents a methodological approach to the insecurity associated with urban peripheries, using the western area of Mexicali, Baja California as a case study. Its focus is on the security of homes, the urban environment and inclusive communities, which serve as a protective mechanism, ranging from collaborative reinforcement of fences with recycled materials to neighbourhood surveillance networks that protect homes. Using the architectural design as inspiration, a prototype of security portals was created, highlighting the importance of local construction knowledge, recycling of materials and using interconnections between the home and the street. The dataset consists of field research conducted between January 2023 and June 2024. A triple method of analysis was used: (1) classification of facades within a polygon of several neighbourhoods in the Centinela area; (2) descriptive statistics based on a survey of perceived security in each street of the study area; and (3) participatory workshops to design urban strategies using materials obtained in the surroundings. The result is a proposal for entryways referred to as 'sidewalkdesign' because it combines the transition between the home, the sidewalk and the street, promotes neighbourhood spaces for meeting and cooperation and, most of all, ensures that homes remain safe through physical barriers and natural surveillance.

Keywords: Social architecture, Popular housing, Entryways, Mexicali

Introduction

Historically, the western periphery of Mexicali has been known for its informal settlements and self-built houses. The acquisition and formalization of land for housing have resulted in a significant influx of individuals who are most vulnerable into this part of the city. During the late 20th century, migrants from southern Mexico settled in deprived areas surrounding Mexicali and Imperial Valley (Méndez, 2021). This has resulted in a precarious yet diverse neighbourhood actively working to overcome urban challenges such as deficits in infrastructure and services. Family members in the border region often built their homes with materials considered trash, such as discarded construction materials and agricultural materials from American farms.

Over the last few decades, a neighbourhood in western Mexicali named Centinela has seen rapid growth in self-built homes. We conducted a series of neighbourhood meetings and workshops following the principles of participatory design and community architecture to gain an understanding of and empathy for the lifestyle of the residents in these communities. Applied research was conducted in the Centinela´s neighbourhoods by architecture students and residents. We wanted to develop strategies and housing improvements that can be implemented collaboratively by architecture students, urban planners and anyone else who can work directly with precarious communities in the future.

Housing systems are composed of the interactions between actors related to housing development, delivery and operation within the broader urban context (Ayub et al., 2020). Urban interconnection, as a system or network connecting different parts of a city, is collectively shaped by actors and their interactions. Urban peripheries are characterized by a variety of cultural models, and housing developments often follow organic forms associated with self-construction and progressive construction (Hernández, 2023).

For urban design and development, hierarchical (top-down or bottom-up) and network (peer-to-peer) analyses are both critical (Figure 1). According to this perspective, urban development can be optimized by integrating infrastructure, delivering essential services, improving accessibility to public spaces, improving mobility and strengthening social inclusion.

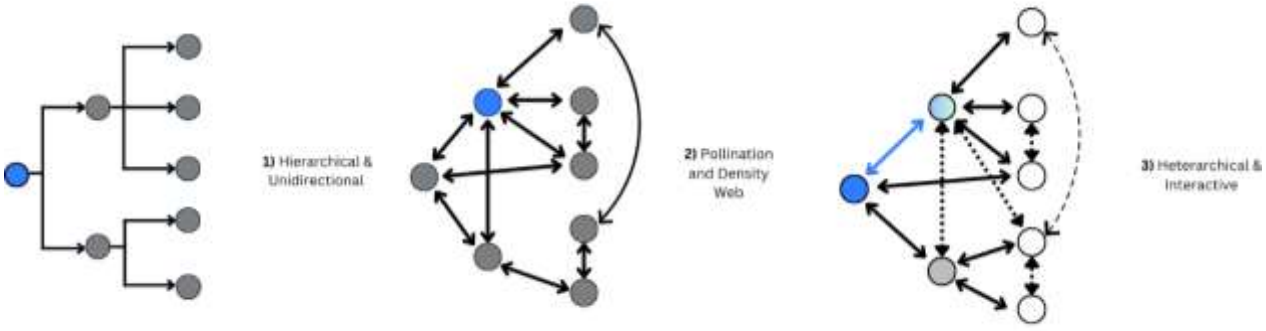


Figure 1. Social structures and interactions.
Source: Based on Cumming, 2016.

Due to the diffuse nature of urban expansion along the Mexicali border, analysing the physical systems intercepted by public transportation, pedestrian paths, bicycle paths and passageways on more minor scales, such as colonies and neighbourhood centres, is necessary. Additionally, examining how urban dynamism develops concerning the density of schools, hospitals, parks and markets is crucial. Likewise, social sciences and architectural design contribute to a thorough understanding of peripheries. Both disciplines are increasingly vital in protecting and enhancing the urban periphery.

During the early 1900s, when the border city was established, the western neighbourhoods of Mexicali were separated. In the 1950s, when the Bracero Programme was implemented, the eastern and southern areas were emphasized, and in the 1990s, the industrial project mainly focused on the east side. Several neighbourhoods, such as Centinela and San Pablo, remained low in density and isolated from the rest of the city (Map 1). However, urban fringes become focal points of cultural and ethnic practices in borderlands, not only as a place where economic and political forces manifest against a complex social dynamic, but also as a centre of those forces (Holguín, 2011).

Map 1: Housing density in the Centinela area, Mexicali, 2024.

One of the most critical concerns of contemporary cities is providing a comfortable and safe public space. Despite the emphasis on "eyes on the street", as the sociopolitical activist Jane Jacobs proposed, this concern has remained constant in recent decades. As outlined in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, natural surveillance refers to the continuous surveillance conducted by residents and merchants in these areas from their homes towards the street to ensure that streets and urban spaces are well guarded. In Jacobs' view, given the importance that residents place on the urban environment to guarantee their well-being, they naturally become "ordinary guardians of the street", with the authority to deter inappropriate behaviour.

Natural surveillance can be considered from the perspective of four types of spatiality, which possess the following qualities: 1) contact spaces between buildings and streets; 2) attractive and appealing public spaces; 3) lighting spaces; and finally 4) broad walking areas. In terms of the peripheral situation, the scope of this theory lies in its proposal for security and coexistence in the neighbourhood that can be generated by building a fence, wall or natural border that connects the sidewalk to the street. The question is how this can be accomplished in an urban environment marked by precariousness. This is where neighbourhood-collaborative networks are vital in integrating design solutions, urban strategies and social organization for the well-being of communities.

In terms of the quality of public space on the street, Gehl (2010) proposes three fundamental ideas: *"Life comes first, then space, then buildings.";"The function of urban design is to make life easier and more pleasant for people"* and *"Streets and public spaces are the lifeblood of a city"* Gehl, 2010). However, in our contemporary world, urbanization is dominated by large-scale urban projects, which are carried out without significant consideration for social issues. University urban design studios provide opportunities for critical reflection on urban issues (Batuman & Altay, 2014).

Gehl's *Cities for People* (2010) illustrates the power of urban design when it emphasizes social interaction and human experience. As part of this work, Gehl identifies several key factors contributing to a people-centred approach to urban planning. Politicians and architects are responsible for adhering to human well-being in designing a city based on innovative technology. However, the key to urban design lies in people's imaginations and how they envision their children and grandchildren living there.

Based on communicative planning theory, urban planners must slow the planning process to increase participation and involvement (Calderon et al., 2022). As part of the security analysis in the poor areas of Mexicali, participation mechanisms were established between architecture students and neighbourhood organizations. To achieve participatory design, it is necessary to find ways to involve citizens in the process of making decisions about urban design and development.

Rather than treating participatory design as a methodology, it can be seen as a way to conduct any methodology (Udoewa, 2022). This paper proposes three types of participation: the designer as community member, the community member as designer and the community member as facilitator. By emphasizing citizen participation in the interventions, proposals will arise and be based on the community's needs and concerns since they are considered through participatory design workshops and empathetic dialogues throughout the process.

Materials and methods

This case study examines the Centinela area in western Mexicali and the citizen dialogue process it involve, based on ethnographic research inspired by Forester's (2017) emphasis on 'practice stories' and his pragmatic critical approach. Within the context of the case study, we examine what each resident does and how they cope with the challenges of living in their neighbourhood. The data collection process was undertaken between the years of 2023 and 2024, during the period of the dialogue between the residents and architecture students.

The analysis was carried out based on observations and decisions made during four meetings in which the design process was implemented. The architecture students drew illustrations depicting the condition of the houses and developed proposals for each family. We conducted five semi-structured interviews with neighbourhood leaders and informal discussions with the students involved in the design and implementation of the project. A semi-structured interview allowed the neighbourhood leaders to express themselves freely. The survey questions addressed community needs, perceptions of the proposed designs and potential effects on neighbourhood dynamics.

Safety barriers

Two aspects of security may be harmonious or discordant: subjective and objective. A subjective aspect refers to a person's perception of an event based on their assessment of its risk. Subjectivity is primarily characterized by the self-affirmation of "feeling safe" and is strongly influenced by self-confidence and trust in the environment. Conversely, the objective aspect of security is concerned with objective events that do not depend on the individual's perspective. From the double subjective and objective security factors, the city is typically considered "unsafe" primarily because the residents and neighbours stigmatize it subjectively. As an objective tool for assessing risk and insecurity in a city, colony or neighbourhood, crime statistics and urban diagnoses provide objective figures that complement these assessments.

In the process of urban expansion, the periphery of metropolitan areas has been characterized by processes of “sub-urbanization”. Before the real estate boom and the peripheralization of social housing, it was widespread to establish industrial complexes, recycling and waste management centres and complementary services for the city, such as agricultural land, farms and livestock production, among others, in these areas. Peripheries are usually characterized by social groups with a mix of urban and rural residents, and their perspectives tend to blend to promote exchange and the development of subjective security networks. Due to the constant movement of populations in urban peripheries, essential services are often delivered late to meet residents’ needs. Due to the late arrival of services, several additional problems arise since deficiencies are corrected when precariousness has already generated new issues that cannot be solved by simply installing infrastructure or urban equipment.

As a result of government neglect, not only has the physical condition of these neighbourhoods deteriorated, but the stigmatization processes for these communities have also been contaminated with prejudice as a result of the constant dissemination of images of neglected spaces, as well as the classification of urban edges as “dangerous areas” or “no-go zones” (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Perceived fear in the Centinela area, Mexicali, 2024.
Source: Based on a survey from 16 streets (avoiding walking on the streets, carrying valuable objects and leaving home alone).

Theorists concerned with security and urban planning have offered a variety of explanations for how security can be maintained or how insecurity increases in some urban enclaves. First, criminologists published the “broken windows” theory in 1982. In their article, Kelling and Wilson (1982) clarified that crime is not affected by the income level of a neighbourhood, because if a window is broken or a house is not repaired, the impression will be that no one is in charge, which will result in more broken windows and more crimes.

Broken windows are a visual indication of disorder and minor crimes committed through vandalism. Most concerning is that these minor crimes trigger discourses that negatively impact subjective security and shape people's perception of these environments. In cities, the urban periphery is the least protected area by police security, which can lead to the failure of police to control and impose repercussions on minor crimes that characterize them. This can trigger other crimes or create the proliferation of cells and gangs that claim urban enclaves. In "broken windows", the perception of insecurity and criminal networks in the suburbs leads to urban disorder and discourages societies from regaining security.

The Centinela area, located west of Mexicali city, has been referred to as a place of insecurity because it has become normalized that it is a place where crime is prevalent and crimes are committed. The fieldwork conducted by Universidad Autónoma de Baja California students since August 2023 revealed that the main problems in this area are not related to crime but to precarious housing, a lack of services and deterioration of public space and the environment, based on surveys and photographic records. Residents also associate risk with leaving the house alone, walking through the neighbourhood and walking to take the bus (Figure 3).

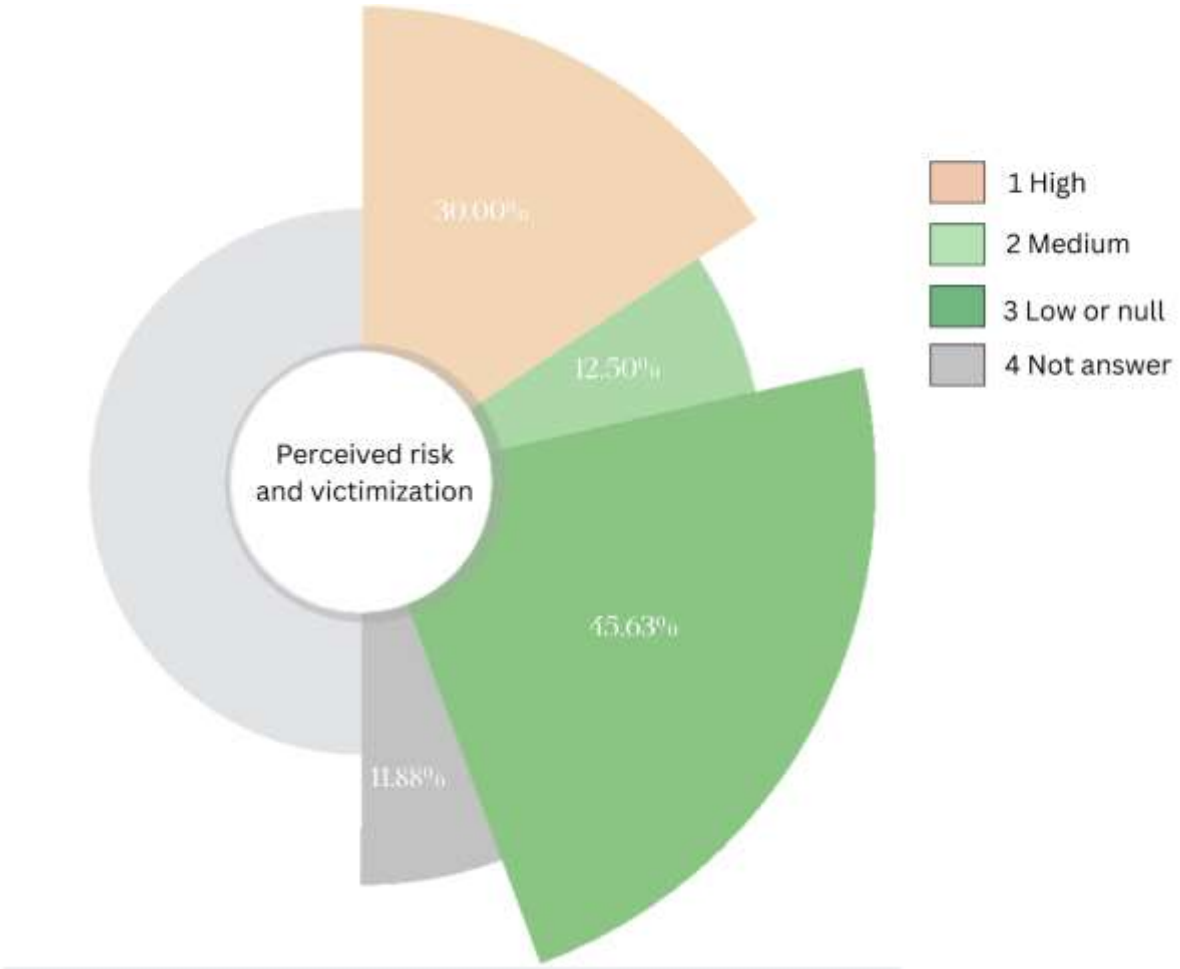


Figure 3: Risk and victimization in the Centinela neighbourhoods, Mexicali 2024.
Source: Based on a survey from 16 streets (leaving the house alone, walking through the neighbourhood and walking to take the bus).

A decline in social relations and insecurity has also accompanied the deterioration of physical spaces in Centinela´s neighbourhoods. In each neighbourhood, such as Centinela, Ampliación Centinela and San Pablo, a neighbourhood committee is responsible for determining and negotiating solutions with

government agencies. Doing so convinced some government entities, in partnership with the neighbours, to undertake improvements to some of their spaces, such as the community park, which was renovated in 2024.

Based on the architectural study of a sample of homes, we could better understand the living conditions of many families. Research projects have provided funding for several housing and urban space improvement initiatives, including fencing, street furniture, roof improvements and, if possible, the construction or restoration of some houses.

As opposed to the notion of “broken windows”, which implies that spaces, such as housing, streets or parks, are slowly degraded as they are neglected, there is also the possibility of progressive rescue and improvement when people are enthusiastic and committed to enhancing their small areas. Upon accumulating needs in the periphery, people prioritize housing deficiencies at the expense of urban infrastructure and public spaces. Even though most homes are considered habitable, they were built using self-construction techniques and recycled materials to resolve deficiencies (Images 1 & 2).

Image 1: Recycled door.

Image 2: Recycled steel roofing sheets.

The effects of social disorganization on the urban periphery

A person’s ideas and actions are influenced by their family environment, their neighbourhood networks and the environment in which they live. Several Chicago School of Criminology authors, including Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942), proposed an explanation for the degradation of these urban enclaves based on social disorganization theory, which was developed in 1942 to focus on the environmental conditions that affect the development of a person in criminology. According to their theory, the environment in which one grows up reflects the behaviours and thoughts one exhibits in response to that environment.

Shaw and McKay argued that crime is the result of abnormal living conditions (high poverty levels and poor health). Disorganization can take several forms: (1) Community control breakdown, when a neighbourhood loses control, causing people to adapt to new circumstances; (2) Uncontrolled immigration, in which immigrants often settle in disadvantaged communities; (3) Factors related to social deprivation, such as divorce, illegitimate births and a higher percentage of males; (4) Lastly, various patterns of criminal behaviour appear in marginalized and poor neighbourhoods where sub-societies often exist, and citizens have a precarious way of life.

Based on the articulation of the broken window theory and the social disorganization theory, a series of conclusions are reached concerning the Centinela's neighbourhoods. In the first place, certain areas that have experienced elevated levels of neglect have a higher level of crime, which helps to explain the lack of control and progressive degradation of the physical and social environment. However, as the theory of social disorganization demonstrates, the environment plays a crucial role in determining an individual's development, even more so when dealing with individuals who grow up in poverty and violence, as is the case in the precarious polygons on the western periphery of Mexicali.

Using photographic analysis, the condition of the fences in the study area was determined by collecting and analyzing photographs of the streets. The fences were classified by type of material and level of quality. Using recycled materials from the same area, a design proposal and a tentative budget for the intervention have been created, preserving the aesthetic values of the urban image and architectural design while putting the community at the centre of the process through three participatory workshops. The analysis found that 234 fences were made of chain link, 233 fences were made of iron, 2 fences were made of tyres and 49 were a combination of recycled materials (Table 1).

Table 1: Materials used in fencing. Centinela neighbourhoods, Mexicali, June 2024.

Street	Galvanised chain link	Wrought iron	Recycled (tyres, timber, steel shades, etc.)
ARISTOTELES	30	44	2
APOLO	40	36	5
EUQUIDES	15	8	4
EUCLIDES	7	1	1
ESQUILO	6	10	2
PITAGORAS	17	13	3
PLATON	6	9	0
SATELITE	12	6	1
SOCRATES	8	9	3
SOFOCLES	33	29	7
CRATER	3	5	2
SAN CRISTOBAL	6	3	1
SANTA LUCIA	21	24	9
SAN PABLO	5	3	4
ATOTONILCO	3	8	2
TECATITLAN	13	15	0
ZIHUATANEJO	9	10	0
IXTAPA	15	7	5
TOTAL	**234**	**233**	**52**

Fieldwork was conducted to determine which houses were in a critical state regarding their physical boundaries. An exploratory walk was conducted along some of its streets to classify houses, sidewalks, vegetation, parks, fauna and some interactions with community members (Images 3–8).

Image 3: Fences made from recycled zinc galvanized roofing.

Image 4: Doorways made from recycled zinc galvanized roofing.

Image 5: Entryways made from recycled wood and homemade stucco.

Image 6: Fences made from brick.

Image 7: Fences made from recycled timber.

Image 8: Doorways made from recycled iron.

Many homes had to cover their lower fences with mesh, sheets, wooden pieces or concrete coatings. Many neighbours said they had to prevent stray dogs from getting into their houses by cutting some wood (as shown in Image 7), and in the same way, many had to do the same, as we could observe that many of the houses had significant but aggressive dogs to “protect” them. However, this also creates a reflex to something dangerous since the sense of security is also lost.

Furthermore, seven houses were surveyed and analysed, one of which was built by its owner using recycled materials, including wood, cardboard, mesh and sand. The woman established her construction methods, insulating the walls with garbage, constructing a foundation that has served her well over the years, plastering partition walls and constructing other walls out of blocks. Even though the house is not in the best condition at present, it is entirely habitable and has been kept up for 32 years despite the seismic conditions of Mexicali. Here is one area where we would like to intervene and support her in improving her safety and quality of life.

Interacting with Centinela’s residents allowed us to better understand other homes, their adaptations and the measures taken to resolve the precariousness of the area. Additionally, the residents shared their traditional construction methods, and in the Integral Design II workshop, it was decided to combine these methods with more technical components. By analysing the fences and their materials, different security options were selected. Residents can obtain these items quickly and without making a significant financial investment.

As part of the interaction with the residents, the architecture students came up with a variety of ideas regarding the possible rehabilitation of their homes including new materials and systems. During their visit to the residents' homes, the residents shared their experiences, made their opinions known and provided feedback on how the students should approach their proposals. The students and residents maintained a constant correspondence via telephone, which further contributed to the exchange of ideas and the sharing of expectations.

The residents presented critical conditions from their perspective, and the students were given a printed presentation that included comments from residents. The site analysis and comments of residents indicate that one of the most critical conditions of these communities is the fences, which are made from discarded materials, giving them a second life and increasing security. Even though many of the houses in the Centinela area do not have fences suitable for protecting their interiors, it is essential to emphasize that the inhabitants have been very creative in solving problems over the years. A physical barrier in the home is necessary; it serves as a security barrier and shows the need to provide a façade of greater significance, even becoming a point of coexistence.

A team of students was assembled to analyze the houses in need of fencing and develop some proposals that would be presented to the community later in such a way that the community selected the one they liked the best while retaining the urban image of the colony, while integrating construction methods and materials from the area. We created fences using existing and reusable materials within the Centinela area, beginning with wooden pallet modules and following extensive research, proposals and evaluations.
A portal-based project is proposed, which connects the houses with the street and provides a space for coexistence on the sidewalks. The proposal is embodied in a prototype that articulates a bench with the fence and a threshold, as described in the following subsection.

Designing sidewalks

The proposal involves recovering materials found in the Centinela neighbourhoods, such as wooden pallets, rubble, wooden pallets, steel sheets, chicken wire and even earth used to construct adobes. By doing so, we can reduce the consumption of new materials, which results in the treatment of those materials, resulting in more significant pollution. As a result of recovery, we are enabling people to give these materials above a second life and, by doing so, provide ecological support to the environment. The proposal is titled "Sidewalk Design". As a result of our transition between housing, sidewalk and street, and by applying the theories we have already mentioned, we can create a public/private space, leading to coexistence on the sidewalk, which is very typical of the border region of Baja California. Using the collected materials, wooden modules are made from pallets or galvanized sheets (Figures 4 and 5), followed by a catalogue allowing potential customers to assemble their fences based on their preferences from assembling wooden modules to finishing the surfaces with mosaics, paints, plasters or mortars.

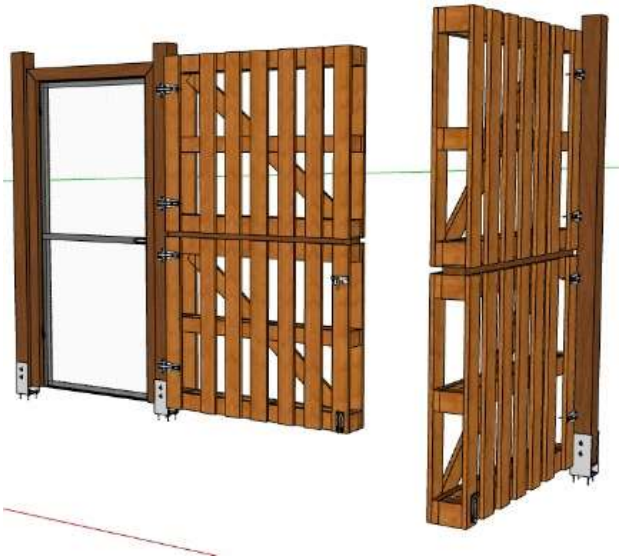


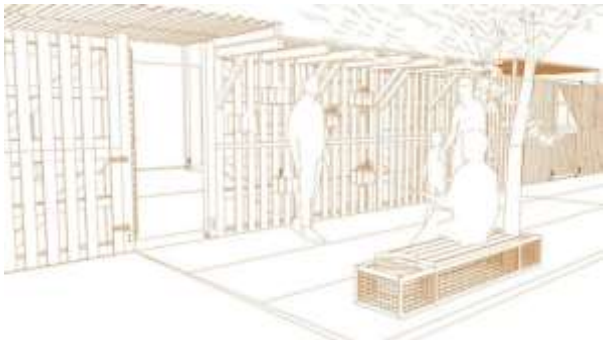
Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Starting from a small foundation, we will create the anchorage using Simpson methods, a method widely used in wood construction in the United States. Since 4x4" wooden beams are readily available and inexpensive in Mexicali, obtaining wooden pallets is no problem. Wooden pallets are used in the transportation of materials so they are often discarded, and many recycling facilities can be found near the border.

To facilitate self-construction, the fences were designed to be easy to assemble, and workshops were conducted so that people within the Centinela area could learn how to construct these fences more efficiently, thus generating a positive impact on their work area by helping to build more fences, which will lead to job opportunities within the neighbourhood. Participatory approaches were used to identify local interests and improve local development and planning activities.

The main objective of this proposal, as shown in Images 9 and 10, is to create a safe and peaceful environment by using fences (in this case assembled from pallet modules, with the posts anchored to the ground with light foundations) and implementing urban furniture consisting of gabions, as well as planting appropriate vegetation and placing a small cover and transitioning from the street to the sidewalk. Achieving a better social and urban environment has been made possible by applying this philosophy. The ability to personalize the fence with respect to the catalogue makes it unique and more personalized, increasing its value for customers.



Images 9 & 10: Pallet design alternatives.

Conclusion

Through participatory design, architecture students can work with residents from poor urban areas to come up with solutions for the problems they are facing. Based on an applied research project involving peripheral urban precarious communities, the studio projects and actions had a chain impact on small communities and had a double benefit for architecture students. In addition, implementing a project based on these criteria and integrating citizens allowed us to expand our vision regarding the peripheries of urban areas.

As a result of participatory design, each detail shared with the community can be used as an excellent opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the city where we live and study, in addition to providing an applied solution to what is usually discussed and proposed in architectural design workshops during professional architectural studies.

When it comes to designing with people, what is considered to be one of the scarcest resources is time. This is because university planning is driven by deadlines that differ from neighbourhood dynamics as well as residents' availability of time to collaborate with teachers and students. Despite the slow progress, the contribution is filtering through as a "grain of sand" so that one day it can no longer be a "dangerous neighbourhood", "crime zone" or "Don't go there, they kill there". For architecture students, one of the most outstanding achievements is empathizing with the inhabitants of their city and deepening the role of architecture in such situations, where, despite the multifaceted nature of the problems, the importance of architecture cannot be overstated.

With the efforts and proposals already made and going forward, a safer, more harmonious neighbourhood is expected. By empowering residents, participatory processes enable them to continue working on their projects even without designers. Although this has been the case, faculty, students and residents will constantly work together to ensure that these achievements are constantly adjusted and improved so that they remain relevant for a long time to come.

This project was well received by the university students, and it certainly sparked a new interest in some students. However, the most significant effect was to get a younger generation interested and excited about learning new skills in collaboration with residents of their own city. Additionally, the university students found that they gained a greater understanding of background and learning differences, as well as improving their ability to work with diverse groups of individuals. According to them, their communication skills had developed significantly, and they could apply it to other projects, whether at university or at work, particularly with people with less skill or less ability to use design language. Additionally, a professor with experience in teaching participatory design to residents will be able to provide valuable advice to some of their future students.

This small project provides a simple alternative that recovers local knowledge and relates it to a participatory design exercise accessible to residents. A similar exercise can be developed in architectural workshops to encourage the next generation to go beyond the ambition of design that focuses on the transformation of a city spontaneously and explosively. Architects need to reinvent themselves from creating spectacular spaces for photography and magazines to incorporate people into the design process to improve their environment as we go through a generational change.

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